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ABSTRACT

At most institutions, freshmen are assigned to one of six residence hall types: freshmen-men; freshmen-women; freshmen-coed; freshmen-upperclass-men; freshmen-upperclass-women; and freshmen-upperclass-coed. In an attempt to clarify which of these residence hall arrangements most benefits freshmen, 2,200 freshmen (40 percent) attending 12 colleges and universities from the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic states completed two questionnaires. The first assessed residence hall environmental climates and the second questioned the subjects' behaviors since arriving on campus. At the conclusion of the term, institutions forwarded grade point averages for selected groups of freshmen. Results showed that freshmen did perceive significant differences between the environments of the six residence hall types. No significant differences were found between residence hall types and freshmen students' behavior patterns or academic performance. (Summaries of the students' perceptions of each of the six residential environments are included.) (KGB)

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An Analysis of Freshman Students' Perceptions of the Living Environment, Behavior, and Academic Achievement in the Residence Hall Systems of Twelve Colleges and Universities

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An Analysis of Freshman Students' Perceptions of the Living Environment, Behavior, and Academic Achievement in the Residence Hall Systems of Twelve Colleges and Universities

I. Summary

This research investigated a longstanding question in student affairs and residential life management: which residence hall living arrangements most promote freshman students' chances for success at college? At most institutions, freshmen are assigned to one of six residence hall types: 1. freshmen-men residence halls, 2. freshmen-women residence halls, 3. freshmen-coed residence halls, 4. freshmen-upperclass-men residence halls, 5. freshmen-upperclass-women residence halls, and 6. freshmen-upperclass-coed residence halls. In an attempt to clarify which of these residence hall arrangements most benefit freshmen, this research focused on the differences between residence hall types using freshman students' perceptions of their living units, behavior patterns in their halls and on campus, and academic performance during their fall semester.

Twelve institutions participated, each with an enrollment of less than 4,000 and a predominantly liberal arts curriculum. These colleges and universities (Alfred University, The College

of William and Mary, DePauw University, Earlham College, Ferrum College, Hanover College, Longwood College, Mansfield University, Maryville College, Pace University at Briarcliff, St. Joseph's College, Valparaiso University) are residential in nature and located in the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic United States. During the 1983 fall term, the investigator traveled to each campus and administered to freshmen two questionnaires: one assessing residence hall environmental climates, the other asking about certain of their behaviors since arriving on campus. Slightly over 2,200 freshmen completed the instruments, this constituting about 40% of all freshmen at the twelve institutions. In addition, fall term grade point averages (GPAs) were received.

Statistical analysis revealed that freshmen did perceive significant differences between the environments of the six residence hall types. For example, freshman men, when housed together in a single-sex arrangement (Residence Hall Type 1), perceived their living environment as significantly less supportive and innovative, but significantly more competitive, than freshmen in the other five types.

Concerning behavior data, no significant relationship was found between it and the residence hall type where freshmen resided. For example, freshman men, when housed with upperclass men (Residence Hall Type 4), drank alcohol no more frequently than freshman men in the other five types. Finally, concerning fall

term GPA, no relationship was found between the type of hall where freshmen lived and their academic performance.

Based on these results, certain recommendations were made as to which living arrangements should be avoided, and which should be promoted. Finally, each participating institution was sent a final report summarizing the particulars of their individual campus, plus the overall results of the study. It was hoped that the expansiveness of this research would result in increased generalizability and external validity for the study and, therefore, offer the profession a more definitive answer about the question of where to place freshmen in college residence halls.

II. Statement of the Problem and Hypotheses

A review of residential life policy at colleges and universities across the U.S. indicates a noticeable difference in approaching the issue of freshmen housing. On some campuses freshmen spend their entire first year in all-freshmen halls, while on other campuses entering the institution means living with sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

Numerous positions have been advanced to support institutional methods for assigning freshmen to residence halls. Advocates of all-freshmen halls frequently make the case that these

arrangements allow freshmen the opportunity to initiate a greater number of intimate friendships with their peers, plus such halls allow institutions to develop more concentrated residence hall programming targeted at freshmen. On the other hand, proponents of freshmen-upperclass housing say that only by living with upperclass students can freshmen gain greater exposure to the true college environment and learn from the modeling behaviors of older students. Advocates of single-sex housing frequently draw on these types of arguments, but also state that residence hall environments allow for greater spontaneity and friendship when the purity of the sexes is maintained.

This research attempted to explore and validate these varying approaches to housing freshmen. It was determined that studies of this issue were not abundant, and in most cases previous research had looked at the situation only on an intra-institutional level. No broad study existed which encompassed a large number of colleges and universities. It was concluded that this study, utilizing 12 colleges and universities incorporating 59 residence halls where freshmen were housed, provided the foundation necessary to make clear statements about freshmen in residence halls.

Fifteen hypotheses were generated. Stated in directional form, the first 10 hypotheses predicted that freshmen, when housed with upperclass students in coed arrangements, would assess their

living environments as significantly more involving, emotionally supportive, independent, traditional in social orientation, academic, intellectual, orderly, influential, innovative, and less competitive than freshmen in all-freshmen halls. These hypotheses were tested using the University Residence Environment Scale (URES).

The next four hypotheses stated that freshmen in upperclass halls would join more campus clubs and organizations, drink alcohol less frequently, use the health center less, and state a personal preference for living with upperclass students. Data for these hypotheses were gathered using a questionnaire developed by the investigator in consultation with the Social Ecology Laboratory at Stanford University.

Finally, the fifteenth hypothesis stated that freshmen, when housed with upperclass students, would perform significantly better academically than freshmen housed in all-freshmen halls. Fall term GPA was used as the standard for measurement.

III. Methodology and Rationale

As mentioned, it was concluded that 12 residential colleges and universities would generate a pool of residence halls large enough to support this study. A large group was necessary because across the U.S. few institutions, if any, offer on their campus the six different housing arrangements this study sought

to investigate. Although the number could easily have been expanded beyond 12, it seemed this would provide a manageable, yet significantly large, population of institutions.

Participating institutions were selected using a typology of higher education set forth by the 1979 Stanford University Project on Academic Covernance. Each college and university met all the criteria of either a private liberal arts college or a public college as defined by the Stanford Project and, in addition, was viewed as a residential institution in a rural or semi-rural location.

The 12 institutions generated a population of 59 residence halls housing slightly over 5,000 freshmen, each in one of the six residence hall types mentioned above. During the 1983 fall term, the investigator spent five weeks traveling campus to campus administering, with the assistance of local student affairs and residential life staffs, the two questionnaires. At the conclusion of the term, institutions forwarded GPAs for selected groups of freshmen. Data were analyzed using high-speed computing facilities.

Person-environment interaction theory, known for many years in the study of organizational behavior and more recently applied to campus ecology, formed the underlying theme for this research. In this project, it was contended from the outset that residence halls constitute one of the most powerful forces in the lives of

all students, particularly freshmen, and freshmen behavior and performance is to a significant degree the consequence of residence hall environmental press. This idea has been advanced previously by numerous authors in the student affairs field.

Using as background the publications of Rudolf Moos, Professor of Psychiatry at Stanford University, this study contended that freshmen would perceive their environments differently depending on whether they resided in all-freshmen, single-sex, or upperclass halls and they would, consequently, differ in their behavior and academic performance. By measuring perception, behavior, and academic performance, it was believed that a more definitive statement could be made about freshmen in college residence halls.

IV. Findings and Relevance to the Profession

The findings of this research were grouped into four sections: 1. freshmen perceptions of residence hall types, 2. differences in behavior between types, 3. differences in GPA between types, and 4. freshmen preference for either all-freshmen or freshmen-upperclass residence halls. Significant points were as follows:

(1.)

freshmen-men's residence halls: Freshmen perceived very low

levels of emotional support. Internal competitiveness highest of the six types. Residents perceived low levels of influence over their environment and indicated lack of innovation.

freshmen-women's residence halls: Freshmen perceived high levels of emotional support. Residents perceived lack of influence over their environment; lowest of the six types. Moderate levels of innovation.

freshmen-coed residence halls: Freshmen perceived moderate levels of emotional support, internal competitiveness, and student influence. Perceived as the most innovative of the six types.

freshmen-upperclass-men's residence halls: Freshmen perceived very low levels of emotional support; lowest of the six types. High internal competitiveness. Low levels of innovation; lowest of the six types.

freshmen-upperclass-women's residence halls: Freshmen perceived very high levels of emotional support; highest of the six types. Low levels of internal competitiveness. High levels of student influence and innovation.

freshmen-upperclass-coed residence halls: Freshmen perceived moderate levels of emotional support. Low internal competitiveness; lowest of the six types. High student influence and moderate levels of innovation.

(2.)

No significant differences were found between residence hall types in freshman students' participation in campus clubs and organizations, frequency of drinking alcoholic beverages, and health center use. An interesting footnote to the alcohol issue was that, for each individual campus, freshman men and women did not differ significantly in drinking frequency.

(3.)

Testing of fall term freshman GPAs indicated that residence hall type had no significant effect on academic performance.

(4.)

On the question of preference, 51% of freshmen preferred freshmen-upperclass housing, 27% preferred all-freshmen housing, and 22% had no opinion.

In terms of relevance to the student affairs profession, this research provides a substantially more expanded and enlightened response to the question of how different residence hall arrangements affect freshman students. Clearly, the results are subject to varying interpretations. The research provides, however, a much stronger base upon which student affairs professionals can form directions for residential life programs.